One Dollar

Winter/Spring *1985*

THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY

of Local Architecture and Preservation

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Vol. XI, Nos. 2 & 3 *Winter/Spring 1985*

Contents

THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY IS PUBLISHED FOUR TIMES A YEAR BY THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE FOUNDATION, INC., P. O. BOX 786, HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA 35804. MICKY MARONEY, EDITOR. SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE MAILED FREE TO ALL FOUNDATION MEMBERS.

from the Editor . . .

In the last issue of the **Quarterly**, the house undergoing restoration at 205 Williams Avenue was described as possibly being the former Planters Hotel which was located on Franklin Street in the early days of Huntsville. It has come to the attention of the editor that this house, although being an early 19th century house of Federal style architecture, was not the Planters Hotel. Research has shown that the Williams Street house was moved to its present location in 1926 from the northeast corner of Madison and Williams streets. The Planters hotel was situated on the southwest corner of Franklin and Gates streets. The present structure on that site is a turn-of-the-century, late Victorian style house which was built on an existing early foundation.

Historic Huntsville Foundation's latest publication, **Historic Huntsville - A City of New Beginnings** by Elise Hopkins Stephens, is available by mail-order and at Harrison Brothers Hardware on South Side Square. An order blank is located on the last page of the **Quarterly** and includes the always-popular **Huntsville Entertains** cookbook.

Cover:

The Governor Thomas Bibb House, 303 Williams Avenue.

Photographs:

By Micky Maroney: Cover, pp. 9 (bottom), 11, 14-19, 25.

By Ralph Hammond: pp. 7, 9, 10. (Author of **Ante-Bellum Mansions of Alabama**)

By Harvie Jones: pp. 28-41.

Dating The Bibb House:

Lore, Theory, and Fact

by Eleanor Newman Hutchens

(EDITOR'S NOTE: An article by Clay Lancaster, published in a 1968 issue of **Alabama Architect**, contained some erroneous information about the Governor Thomas Bibb House in Huntsville. Dr. Eleanor Newman Hutchens is now able to set the record straight with newly found documentation which disproves several of Mr. Lancaster's theories about the house.)

It would seem easy to date a large old house in a town that had always valued its old houses. It would seem even easier to identify the owner who had built such a house, in a town where descendants of all its owners had continued to live right down to the present. Family and community lore should transmit the essential facts, even without hard documentary evidence.

But family and other local lore can fall into error and also, unfortunately, into print. Once in print, it can be picked up and reprinted, with the result that it seems to be supported by a variety of sources.

Worse still, an occasional stranger to the town publishes uninformed speculations to support some preconception of his own. Though the guesses of such a visiting expert can sometimes be refuted by solid sources he has not bothered to consult, the correction never quite catches up with the bad guess, which may appear in a regional or national publication and remain a reference source for decades, taking precedence over accurate accounts in local journals by dint of its wider circulation and supposedly greater authority.

The Thomas Bibb House on Williams Avenue in Huntsville has undergone all these kinds

of erroneous commentary since the dying-out of the early Huntsvillians who knew its origin at first hand. Although I have never doubted the essential family report that Bibb built the house and that it was finished in the 1830's, I have not had irrefutable evidence until a very able researcher, Mr. William Stubno, recently looked for it at my request and found it.

Family lore, as recited to us by our grandmother Ellen White Newman, was clear and rather colorful. I assume she had it from from her great-grandmother Adeline Bibb Bradley, who was Thomas Bibb's daughter and who lived until Ellen was a precocious six, or from Susan Bradley White, Adeline's daughter and Ellen's grandmother, who lived until Ellen was in her twenties. When Ellen was growing up the three of them lived close together, at the eastern foot of McClung Hill and at the top of White Street. The story went as follows:

> After building his plantation house, Belle Mina, for himself, Thomas Bibb built the house in Huntsville for his daughter Adeline. It took nine years to build, but the family lived in it before it was finished. Its brick were made by slaves on the place. Adeline's daughter Susan was married in it in 1840, the most memorable feature of the wedding reception being the crashing collapse of a large table laden with refreshments. Susan and her husband, Thomas White, lived in the house with her parents for several years and the first few of their twelve children were born in it. Then James Bradley, Adeline's husband, lost his money and decided to sell the house - his wife having no say in the matter under the laws of the time. Without telling her, he empowered a lawyer relative to dispose of it. When he confided the bad news to his son-in-law, rich young Thomas White replied that he himself would buy the house and that the Bradleys and Whites could go on living in it as before. Bradley accepted this proposal but left on a business trip to New Orleans the next day without notifying the lawyer of the change in plans. On his return, the lawyer reported that he had sold the house to the Beirnes. Bradley tried to undo the sale, but he had given the lawyer full authority to sell and the matter was closed. Now, Bradley still had not told any of this to his wife, Adeline Bibb Bradley, whose father had built the house for her. One day she beheld, through a window, a servant of the Beirnes setting out plants in her yard. On sending a servant of her own to inquire into this odd behavior, she received the news that her husband had given the Beirnes permission to transplant some of their flora at that time because by the date they themselves were to move into the house the

best season for transplanting would be past. Thus did Adeline learn that her house was lost.

The latter part of this tale is too dramatic to be lightly discarded, and nothing in the records found by Mr. Stubno militates against it; so let us allow it possible truth. The earlier parts, however, must be corrected.

Thomas Bibb built the house not for his daughter but for himself, on the lot where he had lived since 1821 since he was governor of Alabama. He had already given Adeline a house on the northeast corner of Franklin and Williams streets - deeding it to her husband. Bibb was developing his Belle Mina (then spelled Belmina) plantation in Limestone County, where he built another large house.

In the mid-1830's, Bibb evidently decided to move to Louisiana, where he owned cotton and sugar plantations and New Orleans property.[1] In 1835, he advertised Belmina for sale, referring prospective buyers to his sons-in-law James Bradley and J. J. Pleasants.[2] In March 1836, he advertised his "new splendid family residence on Williams Street," "nearly finished," again naming Bradley and Pleasants as his representatives.[3] In September 1836, James Bradley bought the Williams Street property for $5,000,[4] a price that reflects either family generosity or a drastic fall in Huntsville real estate values, or both.

James Bradley and J. J. Pleasants were commission merchants, partners in the firm of Martin Pleasants & Company, which owned large tracts of land in several states as well as some improved town property here and there. The panic of 1837, a

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[1]Thomas Bibb's will, dated 14 February 1839, identifies him as a resident of La Fourche Parish, La., though ill health may have already changed his plans. In the will, he speaks of himself as dying; he leaves Belmina to his widow for her lifetime and then to their eldest son; and the codicils, dated 16 April and 19 August, were witnessed by Huntsville men. (Will Book No. 5, pp. 439-443, Limestone County, Ala.) He died in September 1839.

[2]William Stubno, Jr., **A Report Concerning the Construction Date of the Governor Thomas Bibb Mansion, Located in the Twickenham Historic District, Huntsville**, 1982, unpub. Mr. Stubno cites an advertisement dated 15 November 1835 in **The Southern Advocate** (Huntsville, Ala.) giving a detailed account of Belmina and stating that it had been "erected within the last seven years." The notice is signed "Thomas Bibb, La Fourche, La."

[3]**The Southern Advocate**, 1 March 1836, p. 4 (cited by Stubno).

[4]Deed Book R, pp. 621-622, Madison County Probate Office, Huntsville.

national economic disaster, gradually ruined this prosperous cotton- and land-dealing firm. Presumably, the company had bought cotton at high prices just before the bottom fell out of the market. Such buying was done on credit. If the cotton could not be sold for enough money to repay the debt; and if land values slumped badly, as they did; and if time failed to bring a rise in prices before the hard-pressed banks had to call in their loans, as they did, insolvency set in.

Until his death in 1839, Thomas Bibb apparently kept the firm afloat by endorsing its notes in amounts totalling about $600,000.[5] His heirs - his widow, four sons, and two other sons-in-law as well as James Bradley and J.J. Pleasants - were faced with this debt. His will, written shortly before his death, left Bradley and Pleasants much smaller bequests than the others but directed that his estate not press them for payment of their debts to him as long as the notes could be extended and the interest was paid.[6]

By 1842, it was clear that Martin Pleasants & Co. could not recover. Bibb's other heirs had to assume the debts for which he had made himself liable. In the process, they took over what seems to have been all the assets both of the firm and of its individual partners. The residences of Bradley and Pleasants thus passed into their hands. Adeline did sign, in 1842, the deed by which she and her husband sold them the Williams Street and the Franklin Street houses and other property for $20,000.[7] Since the transaction was all in the family and she continued to live in the Williams Street house, she may have thought of the sale as a legal fiction to save it from the general destruction of Martin Pleasants & Co.

The very serious task of the other heirs, however, was to liquidate all they could in order to pay the debts. Their own separate inheritances from Bibb did not escape; one record indicates that they jointly sold the Louisiana plantations that had been bequeathed individually.[8]

On paper, Martin Pleasants & Co. was solvent. According to the legal agreement of 1842, the firm had accounts receivable of more than $680,000 and owned more than 30,000 acres of land,

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[5]Deed Book T, pp. 333-355, Madison County Probate Office. This long document, discovered by Mr. Stubno, itemizes the assets and liabilities taken over from Martin Pleasants & Co. by the Bibb heirs other than James Bradley and J.J. Pleasants.

[6]Last Will and Testament of Thomas Bibb, cited above.

[7]Deed Book T, p. 333, Madison County Probate Office.

[8]16 La. Ann., 275-280, Charles M. Gillis & Co. v. Nelson & Donalson.

Belle Mina, with its six Doric columns, fanlight, **and hipped** roof, presents a different appearance from the Huntsville **Bibb** House. (Photograph from **Ante-Bellum Mansions of Alabama** by Ralph Hammond; photographs by the Author. Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc. New York, 1951.)

about 150 slaves, some 20 city and town lots, and stock in various companies. Against these assets were debts of about $655,000. The fatal catch was that the debts were owed to banks, while the receivables were owed by individuals and firms, many of which were fellow victims of the panic and therefore unable to pay. Therefore, the assets turned over to the other Bibb heirs, including all interest Bradley and Pleasants might have in Thomas Bibb's estate, must have fallen far short of the liabilities that came with them. The sale of the Williams Street house in 1844 to Andrew Beirne of Virginia,[9] whose son George and his descendants were to occupy it until 1920, must have been absolutely necessary after the longest possible delay.

The family tale of How the House Got Away, then, was a simplified version of a major financial catastrophe that caused pain far beyond the Bradley-White household; but it is correct on the main points that Thomas Bibb built the house and that his son-in-law lost it.

Among divers items of local lore that have achieved print and been thoughtlessly repeated is the story that the Huntsville house was the twin of Belle Mina except for a few improvements. A glance at photographs of the two houses shows that they are not twins, and I know of no respect in which the second

[9]Deed Book V, p. 28, Madison County Probate Office. The house came back to Bibb's descendants when Ellen White Newman and her daughter Susie Newman Hutchens bought it in 1927.

Belle Mina. Plans by Edwin B. Lancaster, A.I.A., from **Ante-Bellum Mansions of Alabama.**

is an improvement on the beautiful plantation house.

They might have looked like twins when the outer walls were a few feet out of the ground: in each, the main block measures about 45 by 65 feet, and the solid brick construction is about 18 inches thick. But Belle Mina has a hipped roof, six Doric columns, and a fanlight over the door, giving quite a different impression from the pediment, the four Ionic columns, and the oblong light over the door of the Huntsville house.

Inside, the central hall of Belle Mina runs the full depth of the house, with a spiral staircase at the rear; in the Huntsville house, the front hall is divided from the back and an angled staircase follows three sides of the back hall. The main downstairs rooms are of about the same large Greek Revival size in the two houses, but Belle Mina conveniently has more upstairs rooms. While both interiors represent transitions from the Federal

The central hall of the Huntsville house is divided into front and back halls.

Belle Mina's long central hall with spiral staircase.

Angular staircase in the back hall of the Huntsville house.

Belle Mina's twin parlors have intricately detailed wooden Federal mantels.

to the Greek Revival style, the Huntsville house, as the slightly later one, is almost entirely Greek Revival with only a few Federal vestiges.[10]

The pronouncements of the outside expert who dates houses according to his idea of when they should have been built would be a source of innocent merriment if they did not become sources for future innocent researchers. It is now in print that the Huntsville house was possibly built by the Beirnes, because (theoretically) the knowledge and taste for Greek Revival residences had not reached North Alabama at the time Bibb owned the property.[11] The same authority finds it "fairly certain" that the columns of Belle Mina were a

[10]Harvie Jones, the very knowledgeable Huntsville architect who has examined the Huntsville house from attic to basement, judges that "the decision to use the modern Greek Revival style was made before the house was out of the ground." (Letter to me, 29 November 1979). Even before Mr. Stubno's discoveries, Mr. Jones marshaled arguments against Clay Lancaster's suggestion that the house was an 1840's renovation of a Federal one, or was originally built in the 1840's.

[11]Clay Lancaster, "Greek Revival Architecture in Alabama," **Alabama Architect** IV, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1968). Although determined to date other Greek Revival architecture late, Lancaster is strangely mild in suggesting a date later than 1815 for the portico of the Leroy Pope house. He attributes the design of that house to George Steele, who was 16 years old and had not yet come to Huntsville at the time it was built. There is some indication that Steele did design the portico in the 1840's. Lancaster chooses to call the Bibb house "the Bradley-Beirne house" in support of his thesis.

Huntsville house library. This mid-19th century marble mantel replaced the original wooden one; the Federal overmantel-mirror has classic Adamesque details.

later addition. But Bibb's 1835 advertisement mentions the colonnade running across the full front of Belle Mina, and the early 1836 one shows that he had almost finished his Huntsville house by that time. Even without this hard evidence, one might reason that the Beirnes, whose descendants live in Huntsville to this day, would long since have corrected the Bibb attribution if it had been false.

As for knowledge and taste in early Huntsville, which the same writer assumes must have been formed in inland Georgia because the founders of Huntsville had come from there, the fact is that the founders were born in Thomas Jefferson's Virginia and the older ones had grown up there. They had helped to found Petersburg, Georgia (named for Petersburg, Virginia), had lived there for fifteen or twenty years until the growing and shipping of tobacco ceased to be profitable there, and had come from that town of wealth and political power[12] to

[12]Ellis Merton Coulter, **Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia**, U. of Ga. Press, Athens, 1965, p. 9. This book is essential to a study of early Huntsville. It is clear that the U.S. Senators and Representatives among the remarkable group of Virginians who built Petersburg and then Huntsville must have seen the new architecture of Washington, D.C., and Tidewater Virginia as it emerged. They were never isolated in the wilderness; no reason exists, therefore, to assume the time lag that Lancaster and some others assert without a search for such documentary evidence as may exist relative to individual houses.

found another in the Tennessee Valley.

Among them was Robert Thompson, Bibb's father-in-law, the fourth of a line of planter-merchants dating from 17th-century Virginia.[13] The Bibbs had been Virginia landowners for four generations, too;[14] and Bibb's mother's first American ancestor had come to Jamestown in 1621 as the brother and chaplain of the governor, Sir Francis Wyatt.[15] The founders of Huntsville were thorough Virginians, participants in the classical spirit that produced neoclassical architecture in 18th-century Virginia.[16]

Moreover, they were not out of touch with current developments in architecture. Three early Huntsville physicians,[17] as well as Thomas Bibb's brother, had attended medical school in Philadelphia during or shortly after the construction there of Benjamin Latrobe's 1798 bank building which introduced major Greek Revival architecture in America. The charming letters of 13-year-old Maria Jane Walker, daughter of U.S. Senator John Williams Walker of Huntsville, note the "fine buildings" of Boston, the "handsome houses" of New Haven, and various other cultural attractions of the East. She was at school in Philadelphia in the 1820's.[18]

Her cousin John J. Coleman, studying law in Connecticut later in the same decade, writes home to Huntsville with equal sprightliness. Stopping in New York on his way south, he observes the New-Bowery Theatre, recently built: "The front is very imposing and Cousin Mary will have an idea of its appearance when I say that it resembles ... the front of the Bank of the U.S. on Chestnut Street, Philad" (not Latrobe's, but this remark again shows the alert inter-

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[13]James Edmonds Saunders, **Early Settlers of Alabama**, orig. pub. 1899, rep. Genealogical Publishing Co., Baltimore, 1969, pp. 474-476.

[14]Ibid., pp. 433-436.

[15]Ibid., p. 434, and Leonardo Andrea, "The Wyatt Family," **The Easley** (S.C.) **Progress**, 10 Sept. 1942.

[16]Joseph G. Baldwin, **The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi**, orig. pub. 1853, rep. Sagamore Press, New York, 1957. The chapter "How the Times Served the Virginians" is a valuable contemporary account of the transplanted Virginian: his habit of carrying Virginia wherever he went, his charm and high spirits, and his vulnerability to the kind of fate that overtook James Bradley in the general collapse of 1837.

[17]David Moore, Thomas Fearn, and Henry Chambers.

[18]Copies of these letters and John J. Coleman's were kindly lent to the author by Dr. Frances Roberts.

est of young early Huntsvillians in architectural design).

Nor were their elders, once settled in Huntsville, confined to village life. Young Coleman as he passed through New Haven (for commencement at Yale), New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore in September 1828 met an astonishing number of Huntsvillians in those cities - including James Bradley, who offered him a leisurely ride home to Huntsville from Baltimore in his gig, with extra horses and a servant.

The architectural historian William Pierson laughs at the "myth" of the Alabama planter as leading a life "sustained by a firm belief in a long-standing culture, and born easily amid the graces of a hospitable and genteel social behavior."[19] This so-called aristocrat, he says, was really the very frontiersman who a quarter of a century earlier had moved into the wilderness with gun in hand and helped to shape a typical frontier society, rough and ruthless. Pierson attributes the Classical Revival in the Deep South to the sudden wealth and what he imagines to have been the consequent assumed aristocratic postures of this class. A study of the individuals who actually built the earliest Greek Revival houses in the South might have taught him otherwise. These planters were heirs to a long-standing polite culture, and it was out of no affected gentility that they carried it on and gave it new expression in houses that were among the first Greek Revival residences in America.

Mr. Stubno's discoveries - the two advertisements and the legal records on Martin Pleasants - have sifted family and other local lore and have sharply corrected the speculations of the architectural historian. The hard evidence has lain in old public documents all the time. This example must be an inspiration to the conscientious researcher and a warning to everybody who is tempted to print mere surmise as authoritative judgment.

[19]William H. Pierson, Jr., **American Buildings and their Architects**, 1970, p. 453.

Architectural Features

The large windows are Greek Revival in size of frames and panes (larger than Federal), but with Federal muntins (wooden strips dividing panes). In noting the latter, Harvie Jones speculated that carpentry tools used for Federal houses dictated the older style shaping. Upstairs windows start at the baseboards - probably a hot-weather defense.

The diamond-shaped windows at the gable ends of the attic are another practical thermal feature, providing cross-ventilation in summer and heat conservation in winter. An architectural student who recently visited the house said he knew of no others like them. The owner would like information about any that may exist. The diamond shape, as opposed to the usual circle, oval, or fan, preserves the severe angles of the front and side pediments.

The columns in front are of brick with stucco finish; column bases are the same. The Ionic capitals are of stone. The entablature is wood. Pilasters are brick with wood caps and bases. (Historic American Buildings Survey.)

Stone is used for the window sills and lintels, the watertable, and under the watertable on the front of the house, while brick is used under the watertable on the sides and back. (H.A.B.S.)

Chimneys are brick with stone caps and are flush with the outside face of the wall. The roof was originally covered with wood shingles. (H.A.B.S.)

The door between the front and back halls is, again, a summer-winter convenience: closed, it stops drafts between the front and rear entrances to the house, whereas when open, it permits air to flow from front to back in summer. Throughout the house, the doorway design is Greek Revival in the living quarters, Federal in the attic and basement, the latter doors and frames perhaps saved from the older house.

The oblong lights over the front door are Greek Revival, in contrast to the Federal fanlight over the front door of Bibb's Belmina house.

Doorway between the front and back halls. Door at left goes to a narrow closet set within the wall. The two-panel doors and bullseye-corner-blocks of the frame are typically Greek Revival.

Doorway between drawing room and dining room. The vertical wooden panel at left is actually a part of the folding doors. When open, they are recessed in the doorframe of the 35-inch-wide wall.

The folding doors between front hall and library, front hall and drawing room, and drawing room and dining room are eminently practical for winter cold and summer heat. Open, they allow free circulation of air in summer; closed, they shut in the fireplace warmth of each room.

The marble mantels in the drawing room and library were installed by the Beirnes in the mid-19th century, presumably replacing Greek Revival wooden ones.

Ornately carved marble mantel in drawing room.

Drawing room mantel detail.

Detail of marble mantel in library. (See page 11.)

The kitchen wing (see H.A.B.S. drawings, plan of first floor) was formerly separated from the main building by an open covered passage and a short flight of steps. The kitchen was raised a few feet and the passage enclosed in the early 20th century. Behind the kitchen are former servants' quarters, the two stories now used as a garage and storage rooms.

The southeast wing formerly extended about twenty feet farther from the wall of the main building. This wing, while having the same trim and details and similar brick as the main house, was not built at the same time as the rest of the house but soon after, possibly during the nine years in which the house was under construction.(H.A.B.S.) Most of this addition was removed in the 1890's.

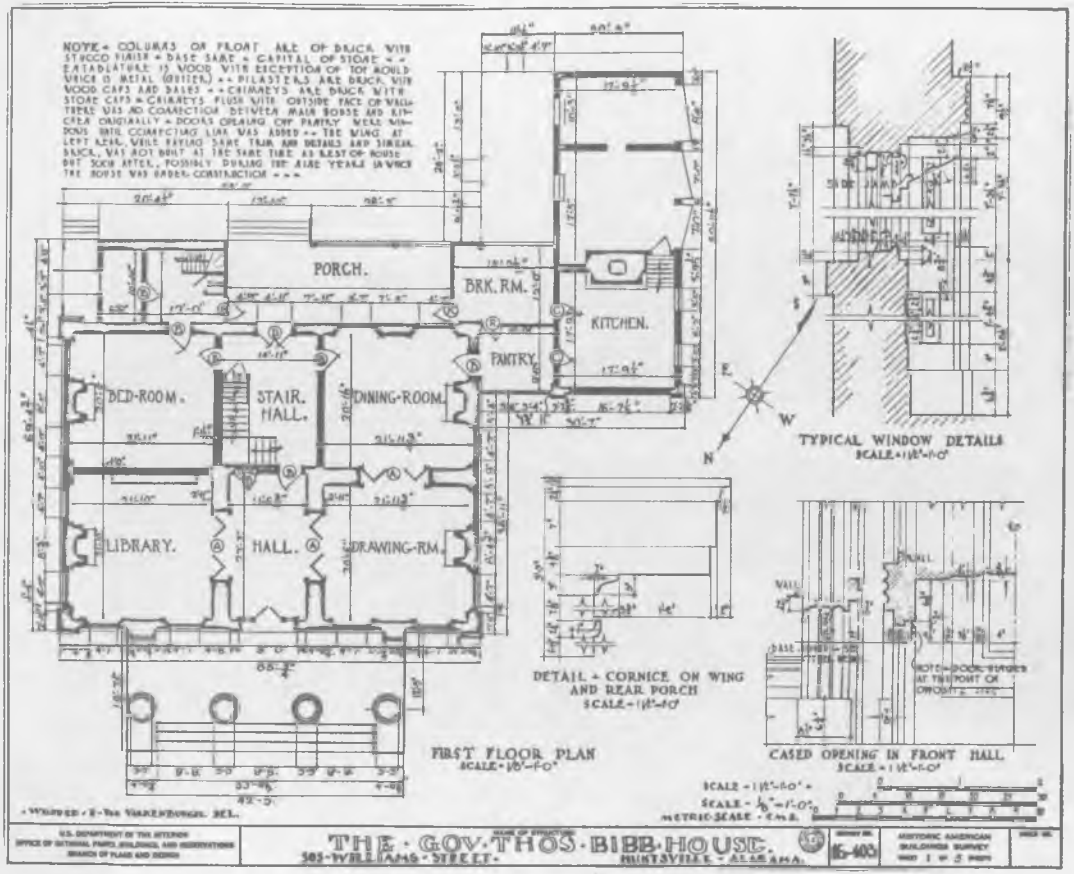
The attic conceals an unusual feature of the house - the Town lattice truss, which may be the only residential one in existence. This building feature was designed for bridges about 1820 by the architect Ithiel Town. An article has been published on the Town lattice truss by Huntsville architect Harvie Jones.

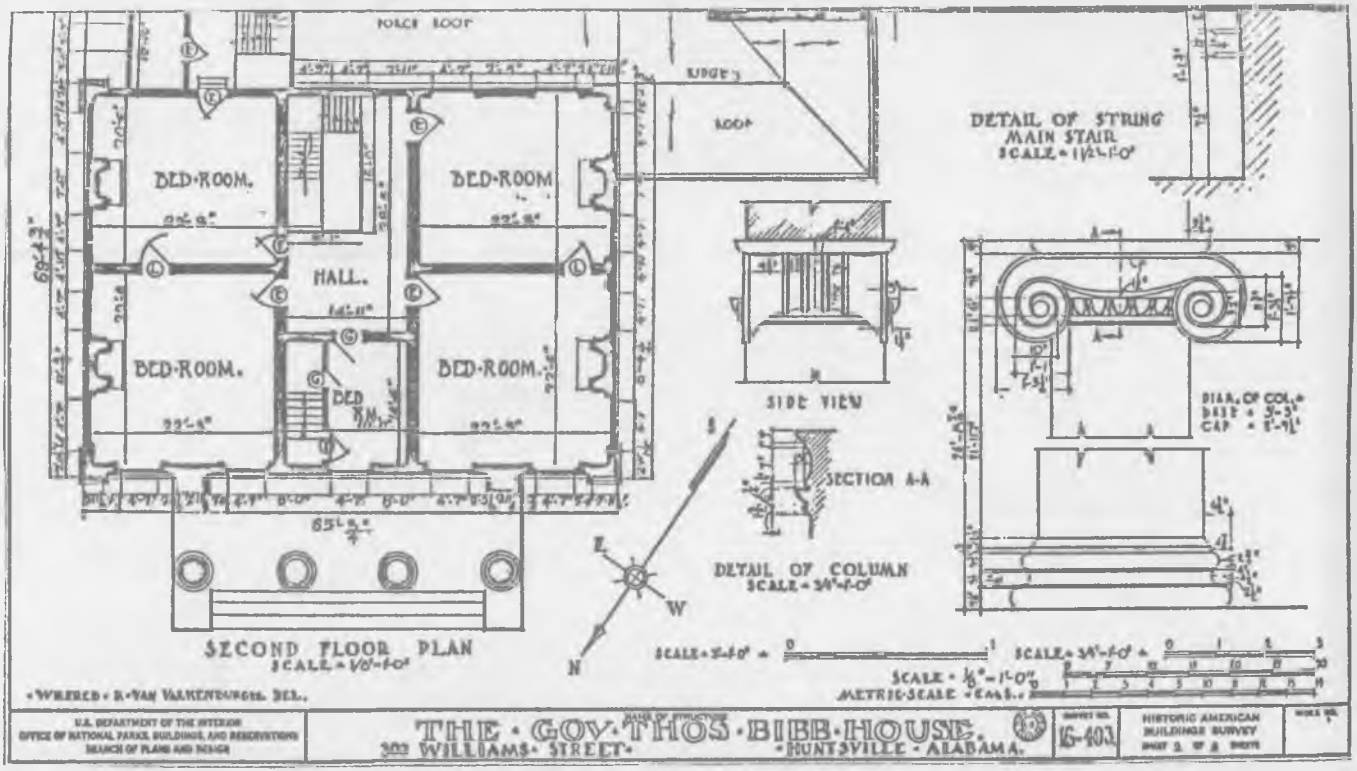
This black marble mantel in the dining room **may have been in** the house originally. Its design is Greek Revival and matches the corner pilasters of the house.

This Greek Revival wooden mantel in the southeast downstairs bedroom is probably original to the house. Another, upstairs, may have been moved from the library or the drawing room when the marble ones were installed.

S.E. upstairs bedroom: This and other Federal Adamesque mantels are in three of the four upstairs rooms. They may have been saved from the house that preceded the present one, or a lingering preference for them may have decided the choice of them for the private rooms of the Greek Revival house.

On following pages are measured drawings of the Governor Thomas Bibb House. These drawings were done as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey of the mid-1930's, sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior to record America's remaining historic architecture and to provide work for architects during the Great Depression. The measurements and drawings of the Bibb House were done by Huntsvillian Wilfred R. Van Valkenburgh. Included in the Survey were eighteen Huntsville and Madison County buildings, many of which are still standing. Information from these drawings has been invaluable in the restoration of many buildings and also has been instrumental in saving some of the structures from demolition. (The Editor.)


NOTE - COLUMNS OR PILASTERS ARE OF BRICK WITH STUCCO FINISH - BASE SAME - CAPITAL OF STONE - - ENTABLATURE IS WOOD WITH EXCEPTION OF TOP MOULDING WHICH IS METAL (OTHER.) - - PILASTERS ARE BRICK WITH WOOD CAPS AND BASES - - CHIMNEYS ARE BRICK WITH STONE CAPS - CHIMNEYS FLUSH WITH OUTSIDE FACE OF WALL - THERE WAS NO CONNECTION BETWEEN MAIN HOUSE AND KITCHEN ORIGINALLY - DOORS OPENING OFF PARTLY GLASS WINDOWS INTO CORRIDORS LIKE WAS ADDED - - THE WING AT LEFT REAR, WHICH BEYOND SAME TRIM AND BRICKS AND STRUCK BRICK, WAS NOT BUILT AT THE SAME TIME AS REST OF HOUSE BUT SOON AFTER, POSSIBLY DURING THE NINE YEARS BEFORE THE HOUSE WAS GIVEN CONSTRUCTION - - -
PORCH.
BRK. RM.
KITCHEN.
PANTRY.
BED-ROOM.
STAIR. HALL.
DINING-ROOM.
LIBRARY.
HALL.
DRAWING-RM.
FIRST FLOOR PLAN
SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
DETAIL - CORNICE ON WING AND REAR PORCH
SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
TYPICAL WINDOW DETAILS
SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
CASED OPENING IN FRONT HALL
SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
SCALE - 1/2"-1'-0"
METRIC SCALE - 1:5
THE · GOV. THOS · BIBB HOUSE.
505 · WILLIAMS · STREET ·
HUNTSVILLE · ALABAMA.
HABS No. AL-403
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY


ROOF
ROOF
BED-ROOM.
BED-ROOM
HALL.
BED-ROOM.
BED-ROOM.
BED
SECOND FLOOR PLAN
SCALE = 1/8"-1'-0"
SIDE VIEW
SECTION A-A
DETAIL OF COLUMN
SCALE = 3/4"-1'-0"
DETAIL OF STRING
MAIN STAIR
SCALE = 1 1/2"-1'-0"
DIAM. OF COL.
BASE = 2'-3"
CAP = 2'-1"
SCALE = 3/4"-1'-0"
SCALE = 3/4"-1'-0"
SCALE = 1/8"-1'-0"
METRIC SCALE
WILFRED B. VAN VALKENBURGH, DEL.
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
OFFICE OF NATIONAL PARKS, BUILDINGS, AND RESERVATIONS
BRANCH OF PLANS AND DESIGN
THE GOV. THOS. BIBB HOUSE
300 WILLIAMS STREET
HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA.
HABS
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HISTORIC AMERICAN
BUILDINGS SURVEY


STONE
BRICK
METAL GUTTER
WOOD
BRICK
CASEMENT
BRICK & STUCCO
NORTH-WEST. ELEVATION.
SCALE - 1/4" = 1'-0"
NOTE - ELEVATION OF KITCHEN WING NOT SHOWN - - SEE OTHER ELEVATIONS
WILFRED - D - VAN VALKENBURGH DEL.
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
OFFICE OF NATIONAL PARKS, BUILDINGS, AND RESERVATIONS
BRANCH OF PLANS AND DESIGN
THE - GOV - THOS - BIBB - HOUSE.
303 WILLIAMS - STREET -
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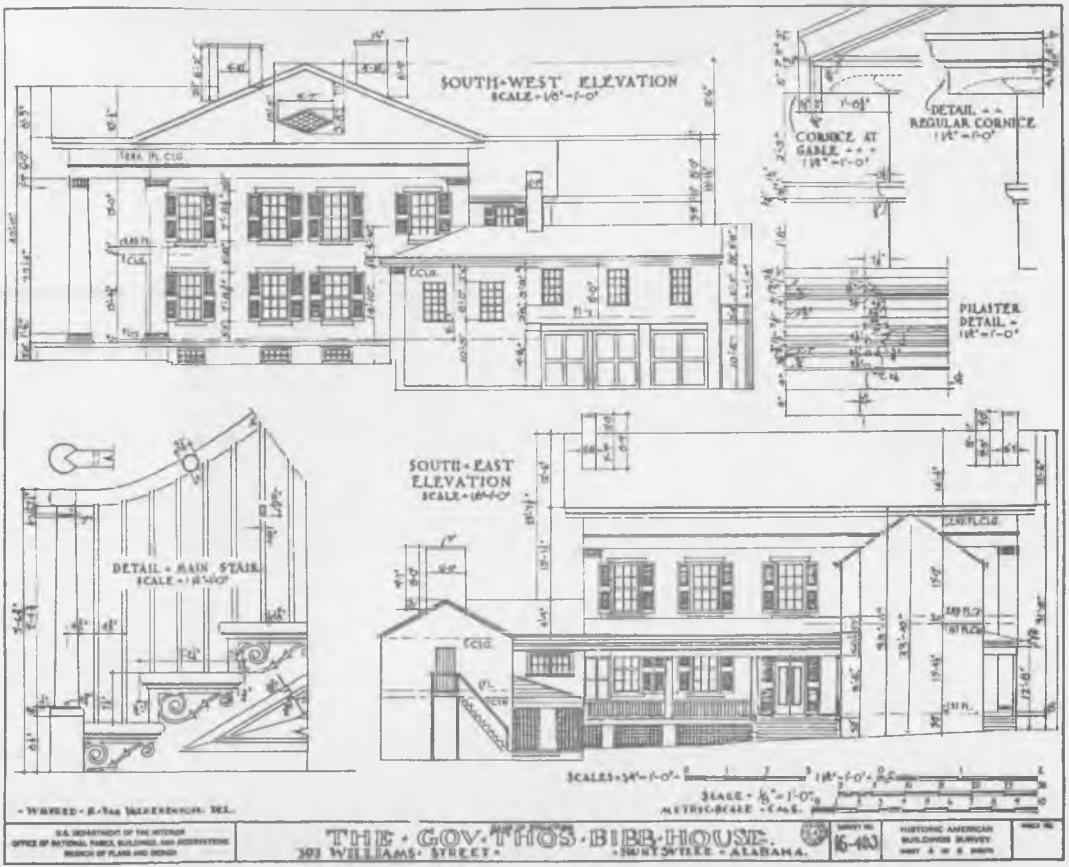
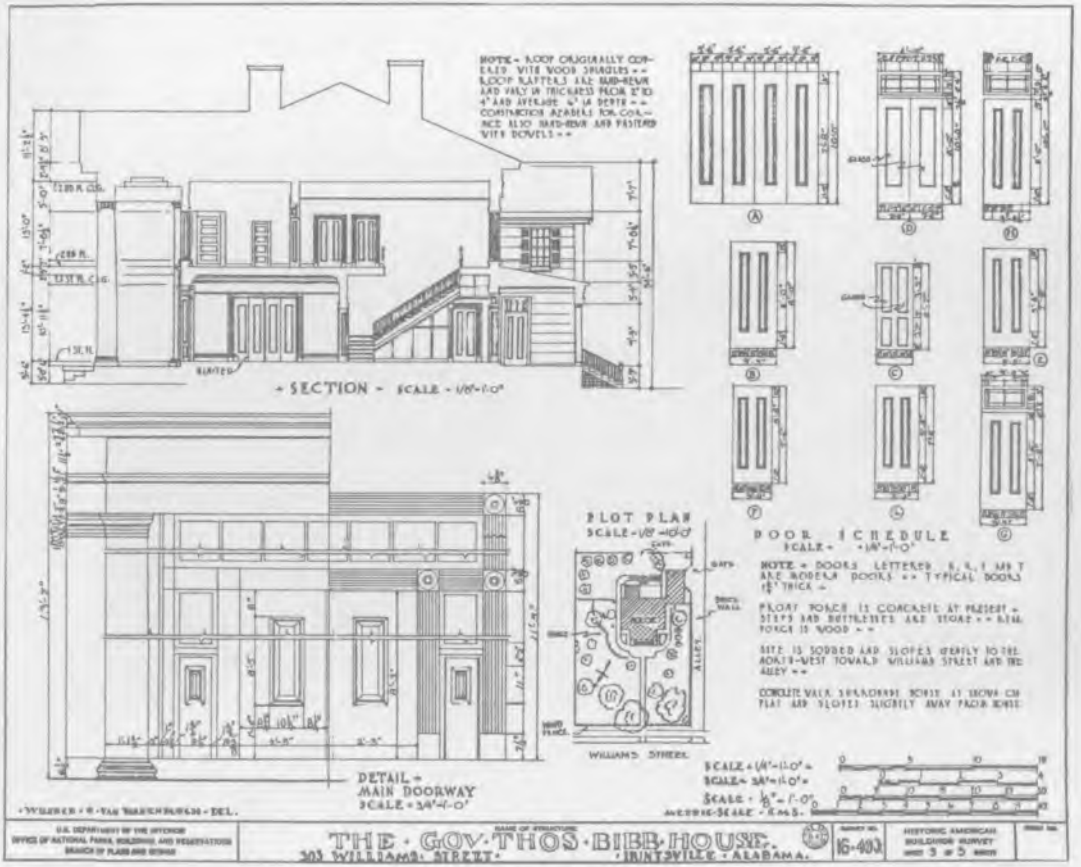
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY


SOUTH-WEST ELEVATION
SCALE-1/8"-1'-0"
CORNICE AT GABLE
DETAIL - REGULAR CORNICE
PILASTER DETAIL
SOUTH-EAST ELEVATION
SCALE-1/8"-1'-0"
DETAIL - MAIN STAIR
THE GOV. THOS. BIBB HOUSE.
303 WILLIAMS STREET
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
16-483


NOTE - ROOF ORIGINALLY COVERED WITH WOOD SHINGLES - - ROOF RAFTERS ARE HAND-HEWN AND VARY IN THICKNESS FROM 2" TO 4" AND AVERAGE 6" IN DEPTH - - CONSTRUCTION AZABELS FOR CORNICE ALSO HAND-HEWN AND FASTENED WITH DOWELS - -
- SECTION - SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
PLOT PLAN
SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
WILLIAMS STREET
ALLEY
DOOR SCHEDULE
SCALE - 1/4"-1'-0"
NOTE - DOORS LETTERED A, B, C, I, M & T ARE MODERN DOORS - - TYPICAL DOORS 1 3/4" THICK -
FRONT PORCH IS CONCRETE AT PRESENT - STEPS AND BUTTRESSES ARE STUCCO - - REAR PORCH IS WOOD - -
SITE IS SODDED AND SLOPES GENTLY TO THE SOUTH-WEST TOWARD WILLIAMS STREET AND THE ALLEY - -
CONCRETE WALK BROADENS NORTH AT SIDEWALK AND SLOPES SLIGHTLY AWAY FROM HOUSE
DETAIL - MAIN DOORWAY
SCALE - 3/4"-1'-0"
SCALE - 1/4"-1'-0"
SCALE - 3/8"-1'-0"
SCALE - 1/8"-1'-0"
METRIC SCALE - CMS.
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NAME OF STRUCTURE:
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HABS NO. 16-483
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SHEET 3 OF 5 SHEETS

A different view of stairway at the Bibb House.

ELEANOR NEWMAN HUTCHENS, a direct descendant of Thomas Bibb, is a native of Huntsville who graduated from Huntsville High School and Agnes Scott College before receiving her master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. She taught English literature at Agnes Scott College and the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She is Emerita Professor of English at UAH and the author of two books.

The Bungalow and Other 20th Century Residential Architecture in Huntsville

An Overview

by Harvie Jones

(EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS ARTICLE IS REPRINTED FROM THE **HUNTSVILLE HISTORICAL REVIEW** WITH PERMISSION OF THE HUNTSVILLE-MADISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY.)

The turn of the twentieth century found several styles of residential architecture being built in Huntsville, including late-Victorian versions of Eastlake and Queen Anne. As a result of the 1876 National Centennial celebrations, Colonial Revival was also an influence. These influences were sometimes freely intermingled in a "Free Classical" style as in the 1902 Van Valkengurgh house at 501 Franklin Street and Williams Avenue. Within the first decade of the century, a number of houses - frequently fine examples designed by architects - of the Bungalow style were built. By the 1920's, the Bungalow style had become the predominant one for houses, and it even had an influence on larger buildings such as Rison School and the YMCA on Greene Street. By the 1920's, surviving Huntsville houses indicate that the major house styles were Bungalow, Tudor or English Cottage, and Colonial Revival, with a few examples of Spanish Colonial Revival and other styles.

The word "bungalow" is rooted in the Bengali (India) word "bangala" which denoted the typical seventeenth century native dwelling of that region of India.[1] Historic drawings indicate that a "bangala" had wide, low, spreading hipped roofs covering open verandahs surrounding the enclosed part of the dwelling. The English in India adopted both the word and the dwelling type as an actual and a symbolic retreat to the simple rural life. The type was eventually transplanted to England and then to America with its symbolism, if not its pure form, intact; a return to the simple, rural life (even when built in rows in streetcar subdivisions). The architectural historian Clay Lancaster found the first known American reference to the word "bungalow" in an 1880 issue of "American Architect and Building News" regarding a Cape Cod summer place.[2] Perhaps due to its symbolism, the bungalow found enormous popularity in newly-developed California. Hundreds of "bungalow books" - stock designs - were published and the style became popular nationwide. Regional types developed, such as the Prairie Style in the Chicago area (Huntsville has two examples of this house style).

The dominant expression of the bungalow is one of easy informality. Remarkably, this comes across whether the bungalow is large or small, expensive or cheap. The means of expression is the use of irregular low spreading forms with wide, exposed-rafter roof eaves, usually half-timbered roughcast stuccoed walls, large porches, bay windows, etc. The roof usually slopes down to the front to keep the form low. Sunlight picks out the dot-dot-dot rhythm of the rafter ends and highlights the texture of the rough stucco and the deep shadow of the wide porch.

The bungalow's strongest period here was the 1920's, until the 1929 financial crash brought a halt to virtually all construction. The next significant period of residential construction in Huntsville was in the early 1940's when hundreds of small "Cape Cod Cottages" were built to house workers for the new Redstone and Huntsville Arsenals which were producing chemical warfare munitions in World War II. These houses were covered with cement-asbestos shingles or clapboards and had a simple rectangular gabled form without roof eaves. They were fast and economical to build, which was what was needed at the time.

This "Cape Cod Cottage" type persisted after World War II until the type the real estate ads call "Ranch-Colonial" became strong in the 1960's. With occasional exceptions, the Ranch-Colonial is the type still most commonly built today. It combines the informality and low rambling form found desirable in the bungalow, with the tradition, reserve and formality of classicism. Its classical ancestor is the architecture of Andrea Palladio, the sixteenth century Italian architect. Many of the Ranch-Colonial houses are, except for their low, spreading proportions, very similar to the the porticoed,

This 1899 house at 308 Eustis Avenue illustrates that the Victorian styles held sway right up to, and partly into the 20th century. This Eastlake-style house is of unusually fine detailing and workmanship. The pressed-brick walls have extremely tight, barely visible mortar joints, for the objective of brickwork of this period was for the wall to appear as monolithic. The architect is unknown.

A nearby church with similar brickwork has recently had its joints gouged out and wide, white mortar joints installed, as a sad revision to the original beauty of the walls.

hipped-roofed 16th century villa designs of Palladio. Palladio's work was revived in England in the early 18th century and his 1570 book **The Four Books of Architecture** was republished and had a great influence in England and consequently in the American colonies. The Georgian and Federal period American architecture owes much to Palladio (as well as to the Baroque period in the case of Georgian and to the work of the 18th century English architect Robert Adam in the case of Federal). Many of the Tuscan-porticoed 1960-1985 Huntsville houses could fairly be called "Ranch Palladian."

Huntsville has a wide variety of 20th century houses which will become even more interesting to us as we realize that the 20th century is now drawing to a close (only about fifteen years remain in the 20th century). It is time we study them more seriously. Perhaps this brief overview will help whet our interest.

The architect Herbert Cowell designed this 1901 Dutch Colonial house at 603 Franklin Street, utilizing a Dutch-Colonial gambrel roof combined with late-Victorian massing (vertical, narrow, irregular). A small "Gothic" vent is in the gable. The windows are quite wide and squarish in proportion, unlike those in the Victorian styles. A balustrade once ran along its porch roof, as evidenced by the base for it, and there may have been a balustrade also at the porch floor level that ran between the masonry piers which support the porch columns.

This finely-detailed, well-constructed circa 1902 house at 501 Franklin Street was designed by the architect Herbert Cowell. It is an analgam of mostly classical elements such as Ionic fluted columns, Adamesque frieze, modillioned cornice, balustrades, etc., with some holdover influence of the Victorian period as seen in the broken flowing massing and the chimneys with vertical inset ribs - a Queen Anne device, as is the pebble-finish tympanum and use of stained glass. This house is a very free, unacademic expression of predominantly Colonial Revival elements which might best be called "Free Classic" in style, a recognized term of the period.

A free adaptation of the Colonial Revival style is represented in this 1907 house at 418 McClung Avenue. While the basic design is technically Colonial Revival (boxy shape, hipped roof, fanlighted and sidelighted entry, modillions, Palladian dormer, sash-blinds, etc.), the proportions are vastly different from the late-Georgian ancestors of this fine house. The roof eaves are about three feet wide - over three times as wide as those of an 18th century Georgian house. The modillions at the eaves are gargantuan in comparison to 18th century ones. On the other hand, the clapboards are extremely narrow, about one-third as wide as in the Georgian period. All this disregard for academic "correctness" comes off splendidly, and the result is an excellent early 20th century house instead of a pale copy of an 18th century one.

Huntsville architect Edgar Love designed this fine early bungalow at 531 Franklin Street in 1909. Notice the "kick" of the roof-ridge ends - a refinement found in at least one other Huntsville bungalow. The zig-zag roof and bay window give this bungalow an informal and welcoming air.

This 1914 house at 612 East Holmes Avenue could be termed a "Swiss style bungalow." It bears a strong family resemblance to many 17th and 18th century Swiss rural houses, with its use of fieldstone, natural wood shingles, and steep gabled roof. The wide, low shed-roofed dormer is also found on old Swiss houses.[3] These Swiss forms, including the use of rough-cast stucco and false half-timber, are found on many bungalows, and it would be fair to say that old Swiss houses were a major influence on the bungalow style.

Huntsville has two examples of the Prairie Style. This 1919 house at 709 East Randolph Avenue is one of them - a bungalow substyle developed in the Chicago area. Not only that, but it is closely patterned after a house designed by the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright, published in the April 1907 **Ladies' Home Journal** as "A Fireproof House for $5,000."[4] There seems little doubt that this house was derived from Wright's design, the only significant difference being the large entry porch rather than Wright's trellis and terrace shown beside the entry. The contractor was J. Nathan Williams.

This pair of small identical bungalows at 430 and 432 Locust Avenue was built in 1923. They were probably built from stock plans on speculation, as many houses were in this boom period. The front porches were likely enclosed later, for screened front porches were not common in this period. The builder of these houses is unknown.

The Swiss influence was strong in many bungalows. This 418 Locust Avenue 1922 bungalow exhibits this influence (long, low swooping roof, large dormer, stucco, false half-timber), but not in a literal manner.[3] Notice the "missing" porch columns - a deliberate design feature. It would be an error to "replace" them. This house was built by Fisk & Hopper, contractors. Its design probably came from a "bungalow book" of stock plans.

These mill-worker's rental houses on north Meridian Street were probably built in the early 1920's by Lincoln Mills. While small and modest, they display the bungalow characteristics of wide, low eaves with exposed rafter-ends, wide front porch and rough-cast stuccoed walls. In its squarish hip-roofed form, these bungalows are actually closer to the original Bengali "bangala" than most of the more elaborate Swiss-influenced versions.

This pair of nearly-identical stuccoed houses at 136 and 138 Walker Avenue represent the Spanish Colonial Revival style, rare in Huntsville but very common in some other cities. They were built in 1929 by Harold Riggins. The ceramic pan-tile roofs are probably the 56-year-old originals. These small houses are unusually good examples of their style.

The sculptural chimney, dark brick and steep roof denote this house as being of the English Cottage style. This house at 609 Randolph Avenue was built circa 1930. This style is frequently referred to as "Tudor." The **Old House Journal** feels that this term should be restricted to half-timber versions of this English Renaissance Revival style.

A large subdivision of houses similar to this one on Sewanee Road was built in the early 1940's during World War II to house Redstone and Huntsville Arsenal workers. Its style is derived from old New England cottages, except with a front porch added, and thus could be called a "Cape Cod Cottage" revival style.

This 1960's house on Lucerne Drive is one of Huntsville's many latter 20th century "Ranch Colonial" examples. This one unwittingly relates very closely to the designs of the 16th century architect Andrea Palladio (see text) and thus is a good candidate for the term "Ranch Palladian." The design may be from a stock plan, or from a "house-plan service" (local drafting companies that work up plans for speculative builders, usually as modifications and variations on the builder's favorite plans). This neighborhood has several houses of nearly-identical plans, but with exterior variations and "reverses."

NOTES:

[1]Winter, Robert, **The California Bungalow**, Hennessy & Ingalls, Inc., Los Angeles, 1980, p. 19.

[2]Ibid., p. 21.

[3]Smith, G. E. Kidder, **Switzerland Builds**, Ahlen & Akerlunds, Stockholm, 1950, pp. 43,52, 53.

[4]Brooks, H. Allen, **The Prairie School**, University of Toronto Press, 1972, p. 123.

CREDITS:

Historical data on individual structures (dates, architect, contractor) - City of Huntsville Planning Commission, Linda Bayer, Historical Planner.

Photographs - Harvie P. Jones, F.A.I.A.

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